



**"Nothing More, Nothing Less for All People with Disabilities"**

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**Chad W. Underwood**

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**WRITTEN TESTIMONY**

**NEED FOR INCREASED FUNDING FOR INDEPENDENT LIVING CENTERS**

**CHAD W. UNDERWOOD, CEO, ACCESS TO INDEPENDENCE**

Hello, my name is Chad Underwood and I am the Chief Executive Officer at Access to Independence, one of New York's 45 Independent Living Centers, an ILC. We are located in Cortland, the Crown City. This year, we celebrate 20 years of service to communities throughout Central New York, including the Finger Lakes and the Southern Tier, and to the 30,000 people to whom we have provided at least one service in that time.

As an ILC, Access to Independence is a non-residential, peer-run, consumer-led nonprofit that provides resources and advocacy to people with disabilities, their family members, their caregivers, community service providers, business leaders and local, state and national government officials. Access to Independence empowers people with disabilities to lead more independent lives in their community and we strive to open doors to full participation and access for all.

Access to Independence is the only cross-disability provider of services in our community. We believe that all people with disabilities have the right to control their own lives, make their own decisions, and to participate fully in society. We are governed by a Board of Directors that comprises 70% people with disabilities, and all 13 of our staff are people with disabilities or caregivers of people with disabilities.

I am here today to tell you there is a rising demand for our services that we are not able to meet. My organization received \$272,590 from the NYS Education Department last year, just four percent more than it received 10 years ago. Over the past 10 years, inflation exceeded 16%, our health insurance costs soared 350%, disability, property and liability insurances grew by 45%, our rent increased by 30%, and our payroll increased by 25%. A tightening job market and minimum wage increases threaten our sustainability. Consider the math.

During the same time period, the number of people Access to Independence staff served annually increased by 65%. As our local government has been forced to reduce and/or shift staff to accommodate state mandate and budget caps, we are receiving more and more referrals from our local Department of Social Services and Office for Aging.

We have saved the State just under \$6,000,000 in institutionalizations costs by helping to transition or divert 175 people from nursing home placement. We have completed 500 home modifications to allow for people with access barriers due to disability or age, to remain home. We have helped more than 100 youth and adults secure competitive employment.

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On behalf of my Board of Directors, I want you to know that we are at breaking point. We have squeezed every dollar that we get from grants, fee-for-service, and from fundraising. We have also maximized every working minute of each of our staff to provide services in the most efficient way possible. Your reimbursement rates for specialized, local-based, nonprofit services no longer covers our costs. At the current funding level, in order to keep our doors open next year, I will have no choice but to lay off at least one full-time staff person, about 8 percent of my workforce. I am also anticipating that at least one other staff person will leave to seek higher pay and benefits in the private sector, as our economy continues to tighten in this era of near-full employment.

I want you to know what will be the effects to our local community when I lose those two staff, who have an average combined experience in the sector of 15 years. Remaining staff will become worried about their jobs as they are asked to work harder to help serve more and more people. I will not be able to recruit new staff with equivalent expertise. People with disabilities will have to wait for services...many will simply lose faith and give-up. Our movement will take a step backwards. People with disabilities will be left behind more than they already are today.

Thank you for the opportunity to spend a few minutes with you on why Access to Independence, people in Central New York, and people with disabilities across the state are urging your increased investment in the independent living movement...for our sons, daughters, brothers, sisters, mothers, fathers and even our grandparents.